

Congress must refine its '05 energy bill

BY TIM BISHOP

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We Long Islanders have weathered a summer of record-breaking gas prices, traffic jams and long, hot lines at the pumps.

Perhaps the most poignant memory we take away from the summer of 2005 is the sadness and disbelief each of us shares with all Americans in the wake of monumental devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. From the lessons learned, we renew our energies with firm resolve to rebuild homes, communities and a way of life along the Gulf Coast.

We should start by refining our energy policy to provide innovative, immediate and meaningful incentives emphasizing conservation and measures to restore lower, stable gas prices - provisions that do not now exist.

I've been speaking with more and more Long Island families worried that larger portions of their paychecks are going straight into their gas tanks instead of their savings accounts. I've heard from fishermen who are frustrated at not being able to fill their tanks with diesel fuel and from farmers paying more each week to ship their produce to market. And I'm worried that many seniors on fixed incomes will find the cost of heating their homes tougher to bear this winter, when the price of home heating oil is expected to increase by 20 percent.

The recently passed energy bill did little, if anything, to help. The Energy Department's own analysis found the bill wouldn't lower gas prices but would, in fact, raise them by as much as 3 to 5 cents a gallon. Complicating the bill's shortcomings, the Bush administration left little doubt that it holds the interests of oil and gas companies above the goal of conservation and the needs of the middle class.

Every dollar set aside for conservation is outnumbered by \$8 worth of tax write-offs to drill, including in pristine sanctuaries. Perhaps Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) summed it up best when he termed the bill the "Leave No Lobbyist Behind Act."

Top priorities for this Congress should be - aside from significantly strengthening emergency preparedness - revisiting the Energy Policy Act of 2005 to build in long-term incentives for conservation and improvements to safely expand existing refinery capacity. We are not yet in dire shortage of oil, but the hurricane knocked out 10 percent of U.S. refining capacity, and though the industry was producing at full capacity long before Katrina, a new refinery hasn't been built in 29 years.

Combined with the absence of a working conservation policy, price-gouging has proliferated and drags down the economy. Every extra dollar Long Islanders pay at the pump is a dollar they are not spending elsewhere. Reduced purchasing power combined with a weak energy policy, oil company mergers, refinery closures and uncertainty over exactly how much more prices will increase in the weeks and months ahead threaten to dilute the fuel driving our economy and reverse the course of any potential recovery.

In the face of so many daunting challenges in preparing for the next natural disaster, preserving our natural resources and expanding our refinery capacity are goals this Congress can achieve. The hurricane was a wake-up call to refine our national energy policy, and last week's blackout in Los Angeles proves why we can't afford to punch the snooze button.

In the short term, protecting low-income families and senior citizens from rising energy costs and the aftershocks of Hurricane Katrina should be our first priority. The Low-Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program has a proven track record for 800,000 families in New York each year and should be indexed to the rising cost of fuel in the coming winter months.

In the long term, building a defense against record-breaking fuel prices entails a forward-looking energy policy that balances conservation, lowering our dependence on foreign energy sources and using the latest technologies to create a more efficient energy infrastructure.

We can accomplish these goals with strong leadership. Congress must work to reopen the energy bill and refine our energy policy for our children and future generations of Americans.